

Human nature tested as 23 people 'start again'

Eden has been dubbed 'the most extreme reality TV show yet'. Contestants will spend a year starting a new society from scratch. Are they doomed to fail – or is human nature inherently good?



Out on a limb: 13 men and 10 women, aged from 24 to 55, are taking part in *Eden*. © Channel 4

'What if we could start again?'

That is the simple question facing viewers of *Eden*, a Channel 4 show which begins on **Monday** and 'aims to challenge everything about modern living'. They will watch 23 members of the public spend a year in a **remote** part of the Scottish highlands forging a new society out of almost **nothing**.

Those involved will need to feed and shelter themselves – and create their own laws. The idea is not entirely new: the title invokes the Biblical story of the garden of Eden; some compare it to the classic novel *Lord of the Flies*; and there have been similar trends in reality TV this **century**.

But the experiment is pertinent at a time of global **upheaval**. Liam Humphreys of Channel 4 says it 'developed partly as a response to a growing malaise among the young with traditional political systems'. One participant, Glenn, says: 'I've had a successful career, but there was something missing'.

Can they create a better society than the

one we already have? The show is likely to shine a light on the strengths and flaws in human nature – a subject which has divided philosophers for centuries.

Major western religions tend to present humans as inherently sinful: hence Augustine's Christian doctrine of **original sin**. In the 17th century, Thomas Hobbes said human life would be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' in its natural state. Such conservative ideas have justified imposing traditional structures and rules, such as organised religions and hierarchical authority.

The **Enlightenment**-inspired ideology of liberalism challenged this. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, argued humans were born good and concerned with others' welfare – implying that people could be given more individual freedom.

Karl Marx, widely regarded as the father of socialism, said capitalism had corrupted humans' inherently cooperative instincts. And *Eden* should delight anarchists, who view all

state authority as inherently evil.

Will the contestants' inherent goodness make their new society a success?

A new dawn

What an exciting opportunity, say some. Our problems are largely the result of broken political and economic structures, stultifying cultural norms and unnecessary technology. If we discarded our unfair civilisation and started again, we would find people are naturally designed to care about each other and work together harmoniously.

Structures, rules and traditions exist for a reason, respond others. They help to bring us together, give everyone a stake in the society around them and make us healthier and more prosperous. We are all naturally selfish. If we were left to our own devices, nothing would protect us from each other – or our own worst instincts.

It could therefore tell you something about how you, or people you know, might react in a similar situation.

Q: But is this really political, or just a TV show?

A: Political ideas are deeply rooted in moral philosophies, and experiments like this can

help to shed a light on what those philosophies should be. This means the show could also help you deepen your understanding of the values you hold and the reasons for them. Do you believe, for example, that societies need order? Do you think we are best when freed from societal constraints? Your responses could inform your views on any political issue.

Q & A

Q: I'm not interested in watching the show. Can it teach me anything?

A: The show is likely to reveal a lot about human behaviour, as the contestants have been taken out of their ordinary environments.

YOU DECIDE

1. Would you like to take part in *Eden* ?
2. Is human nature inherently good?

ACTIVITIES

1. Work in groups of four. You have just arrived as contestants on the set of *Eden*. For five minutes, discuss what you will do on your first day. Then discuss as a class: how did that go? Would your plan have worked?
2. Choose a philosopher mentioned in this article who interests you. Prepare a one-page memo outlining their view of human nature.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Civilisation only holds people back.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

Monday – The first episode will show footage from the contestants' arrival in March. The timing was deliberate, maximising the opportunity to build shelter and store food before the winter.

Remote – 600-acre Ardnamurchan estate.

Nothing – Contestants are only allowed to bring what they can carry and basics needed to

start their experience.

Century – The 21st century has brought many shows which put people together in secluded environments for long periods of time. The launch of *Big Brother* in 2000 is often seen as a seminal moment for reality TV. Some shows, such as *The Island* and *Castaway* (which began on January 1st 2000), are similar to *Eden*.

Upheaval – Global politics has become more turbulent in the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, the 2008 financial crisis and Brexit.

Original sin – The idea that all people inherit the sins of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden, and are therefore born as selfish sinners.

Enlightenment – The philosophical movement in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries that challenged established norms. Its core ideas included reason, individualism, equality and liberty.

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